

Workplace Safety in the Winter

With winter upon us, the NSTU wants to ensure that its members are proactive about, and equipped to deal with, the hazards that come with the coldest season. From icy conditions in the parking lot to wet floors in the school building, winter can create hazards that simply don't exist during the warmer seasons.

According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, over 42,000 workplace injuries are due to fall accidents and the majority of these are same-level falls due to slips and trips.

Beginning with arrival in the school parking lot, you should be on alert for hazards such as poor lighting, snow and ice on the ground, especially 'black ice,' all of which contribute to the risk of a fall. These same hazards may be present when you are supervising outdoor play areas or recreation fields. Inside schools and campuses, floors and stairs may be wet and slippery from melting snow that has been tracked inside on boots and shoes and there may not be adequate support railings. Finally, within classrooms, you should be on the lookout for winter shoes and clothing that may be scattered on walkways or in crowded spaces.

Being aware of these hazards and taking some of the following precautions is a good start to preventing any injuries:

- * When exiting or entering a vehicle, hold on to the vehicle for support.
- * Walk on designated walkways whenever possible. It can be hazardous to take shortcuts over snow piles or areas that cannot be cleared.
- * Make your steps (strides) small.
- * Never run on slippery surfaces. Walk slowly and keep both hands out to stay balanced.
- * Use handrails while walking up and down stairs.
- * Avoid carrying heavy loads that may tip your balance.
- * When entering a building, be sure to use floor mats and boot cleaners to remove moisture from the soles of your shoes. This will help protect you, as well as others who follow, from having to walk on wet or slippery surfaces.
- * Choose your path carefully to avoid wet or slippery floors

or boots and coats that may have been left on walkways. (University of Alberta: Environment, Health and Safety, "Preventing Winter Slips and Trips")

When you see any of these potential hazards, keep in mind that you have a statutory obligation to take every reasonable precaution in the circumstances to protect your own health and safety and that of other persons at or near the workplace. Correspondingly, the employer has an obligation under the Occupational Health and Safety Act to protect the health and safety of teachers and community college members, to inform them about health or safety hazards in the workplace, to have a system in place to regularly monitor the workplace for potential hazards, to provide reports of health and safety inspections and monitoring, and to respond to a written recommendation of the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee ("JOHS Committee").

If you have identified a hazard to health or safety in the workplace due to winter conditions, you should not wait to take action. You should first report the hazard to your principal/supervisor—verbally and then confirm the hazard report in writing with a copy to human resources and the JOHS Committee. If your principal/supervisor has not remedied the matter to your satisfaction, you should then report the hazard to the JOHS Committee—verbally and then confirm the concern in writing with a copy to human resources. Finally, if the JOHS Committee has not remedied the matter to your satisfaction, you should report the hazard to the Occupational Health and Safety Division—again, verbally and then confirm the concern in writing with a copy to human resources.

The NSTU encourages members to be proactive in using this reporting system and to contact their NSTU staff officer at any time to assist them with reporting hazards and following up on any actions taken by the employer. Call the NSTU if there is a hazard to workplace safety that is not being addressed by the employer.

*For more detailed information on Occupational Health and Safety issues and the steps to follow when reporting a hazard, see the NSTU booklet: **Workplace Health & Safety: Know Your Rights—A Guide for NSTU members.***